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AUTHOR	Lewis, Karla C.
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated instructional aides' relationships with teachers and parents and their status in schools, using Connelly and Clandinin's (1988) epistemology of "teacher as knower" as a way to frame their voices. A total of 17 predominantly female instructional aides from five elementary schools in three midwestern U.S. school districts completed interviews. Data analysis indicated that instructional aides had generally positive relationships with teachers. Some placed value on the freedom given to them by teachers, and other expressed strong appreciation for teachers' listening skills. Instructional aides' relationships with teachers varied by their location in the school and the level of supervision they experienced. Negative comments regarding relationships with teachers were rare and tended to pertain to direct and indirect comments by teachers, hostile school climates, and teachers' lack of appreciation of aides' talents and skills and lack of supervision. Aides gave mixed messages about their relationships with students' parents and families. Some had close relationships with parents and often served as babysitters for their students. Others placed the blame for students' problems on their families and rarely recognized the institutional factors that influenced students' academic success. (Contains 49 references.) (SM)

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COLLEAGUES OR CULTURAL BROKERS ? INSTRUCTIONAL AIDES' RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Karla C. Lewis, Ph.D.
Center for Social Organization of Schools
Johns Hopkins University

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COLLEAGUES OR CULTURAL BROKERS ?
INSTRUCTIONAL AIDES' RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Instructional aides were formally introduced to classrooms over forty years ago, but their jobs have changed over time (Lewis, 2001). Now, there are over half a million instructional aides in America's classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Currently, instructional aides do more than prepare materials for teachers and monitor the lunchroom. Most work alongside teachers to instruct and assist students, and often interact with parents. Theoretically, instructional aides and teachers should be working as a team (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Lacattiva, 1985). While some instructional aides have excellent relationships with the teachers they assist, others feel misunderstood and unappreciated.

Urban districts have tended to employ instructional aides from the surrounding school community. That does not automatically create the desired relationships among aides, teachers, parents, and students. Although instructional aides are often called upon to be cultural brokers and bridges to the school community, many are not prepared to assume that role (French & Pickett, 1997; Pickett, 1995; Rubin & Long, 1994; Rueda & Deneve, 1999). Many instructional aides have frequent contact and positive relationships with students' families. Some, however, have no contact with parents, and others view parents as deficient in skills or abilities to help their children.

Although it has been assumed that instructional aides, teachers, and parents will work well together to help students succeed, few studies have explored instructional aides' perceptions of these roles and relationships. Are instructional aides colleagues of teachers, bridges to the school community, both, or neither? This study addresses this

question by asking instructional aides about their relationships with teachers and parents and about their status in schools, and suggests policies that would create stronger bonds among these partners in education.[1]

Background

During the 1950s, the importance of instructional aides was recognized in studies conducted in Bay City, Michigan and at Syracuse University (Bowman & Klopf, 1968; Cruickshank & Herring, 1957; Gartner, 1971; Kaplan, 1977). The job evolved as a result of a series of national events in the 1960s and 1970s, including the Civil Rights and women's rights movement. President Lyndon Johnson's education policies and the "War on Poverty" increased the need for instructional aides in Head Start, a federally supported early childhood program. The role of instructional aide continued in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and the Scheurer Amendment (1966) to the War on Poverty's basic legislation, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which authorized the development of new careers for the traditionally undereducated underclass in economically distressed communities (Kaplan, 1977). In addition, the Bilingual Education Act in 1968 led to the hiring of bilingual teaching assistants to address a shortage of bilingual teachers.

Minorities, specifically Black and Latina women in urban areas, were recruited to become instructional aides. Black women were needed because many teachers knew little about poor, Black children. Latina women were hired to speak to the children in Spanish and interpret for the monolingual teachers. These women were hired in locales served by Title I and programs financed by the Office of Economic Opportunity (Tanner & Tanner, 1968). The Educational Service Bureau (1966) stipulated, " the persons hired to so

function [as teacher assistants] are expected to be indigenous to the neighborhood or subculture served by the school" (p.25). The hiring of minority women was also seen as a way to bridge language and cultural communication gaps between home and school and make children feel more comfortable in desegregated settings (Educational Service Bureau, 1966; Hayes, 1965; Shank and McElroy, 1970). While Shank and McElroy (1970) used "ghetto" as the code word for Black, Gartner and Riessman (1974) discussed the paraprofessional in terms of class and race. Gartner and Riessman noted: "Professionals....accepted them as a buffer. The paraprofessional was sometimes called a bridge to the poor. In a sense, the paraprofessional was the lesser of two evils, the other 'evil' being the poor or minority consumer who was highly critical of teachers, social workers, and other human service professionals" (p. 254).

The Education Professions Development Act of 1968 introduced the idea of career development for instructional aides. Kaplan (1977) explained that the Career Opportunities Program (COP) resulted from this bill:

> At its core, the Career Opportunities Program was an uncomplicated attempt to provide for indigenous community residents working as paraprofessional teacher aides in the Nation's low-income urban and rural schools the opportunity to advance within the educational professions and ultimately, to improved the learning of the children in those schools (p.2).

In 1973, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) provided an opportunity for school districts to receive money to train economically disadvantaged, unemployed, and underemployed persons in an area that would lead to professional growth. The passage of PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (currently known as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act - IDEA)

required more instructional aides so that students with disabilities could have individualized services.

As a result of the aforementioned legislative acts and the resulting training, instructional aides evolved from being clerical assistants to being liaisons between the school and community, tutors, and providers of other direct and indirect services to students and their parents.

Related Research

One dominant theme in the literature describes instructional aides as team members with teachers, parents, other support staff, and administrators. This literature places students at the center of a learning model and teachers, instructional aides, social workers, principals, and parents around students (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Hayes, 1965; Lacattiva, 1985; Pickett, 1995). All of the team members have significant roles to play in the students' educational experiences and all are expected to collaborate and help students achieve.

While some research has noted that instructional aides may serve as a "bridge" between the school and community, others studies suggested the term "cultural broker" (Brockett,1998; Gartner & Riessman, 1974; Gentemann and Whitehead, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1998). These cultural brokers understand mainstream as well as ethnic culture and are therefore able to relate to students and administrators. The term describes the role that some instructional aides are expected to play. Whether or not instructional aides have connections to the communities they work in, it is assumed that because they are

"similar" in race, ethnicity, or class with the students and families, they can bridge a cultural gap between home and school.

Most research on teachers, parents, and instructional aides has examined teachers' and parents' perceptions of instructional aides (French & Chopra, 1999; Green & Barnes, 1989). Bennett, Deluca, and Bruns (1997) focused on parents' and teachers' perspectives of instructional aides in inclusion settings. They found that parents considered paraprofessionals to be an important variable in a successful inclusion setting. French (1998) sampled both paraeducators and resource teachers. Her questionnaires, time-activity logs, and evaluation forms showed that instructional aides performed a range of activities, but were primarily there for instructional purposes. Through her interviews, she found that teachers valued instructional aides, but also believed that paraeducators needed more training. Also, teachers wanted colleagues, instead of someone to supervise.

French and Chopra (1999) studied parents' perceptions of instructional aides. In focus groups with 19 parents who had children in inclusion settings, the researchers found that close relationships existed between parents and paraprofessionals. They also found that parents described four roles that paraprofessionals played: connector, team member, instructor, and physical caregiver/ health service providers. Parents stated that they valued and appreciated the paraprofessionals, but believed that instructional aides needed more training, just as teachers reported in Bennett et. al. (1997).

The research on instructional aides has focused on their roles and others' perceptions' of them. Their roles have been described as subordinate to the teacher and also a bridge or cultural broker to the indigenous community. In addition, they are described as being part of a team in inclusion settings to provide services to students with

disabilities (Bennett, et. al, 1997; Downing, et. al, 2000; Lacattiva, 1985). It may be argued that instructional aides in any setting should be an integral part of any team that works with students.

Except in a few articles on instructional aides in special education, the voices of the instructional aides are missing from the literature (Dowing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Girangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Scharder, & Levine, 1999). The present study builds on prior research by focusing on instructional aides' views of parents and teachers in various school settings.

Theoretical framework

This paper relies on the concept of "teachers' knowledge" (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Doyle, 1990; Shulman, 1987) as a way to study instructional aides' knowledge about their work. Specifically, this research uses Connelly and Clandinin's (1988) epistemology of "teacher as knower" as a way to frame the voices of the instructional aides. Like teachers, they utilize practical knowledge and personal experience. However, unlike teachers there is no theory that places their knowledge at the center of educational research. Connelly and Clandinin coined the term "personal practical knowledge" and define it as:

> A term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons. Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher's past experience, in the teacher's present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher's practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation (p. 25)

This research respects the instructional aides' personal histories and concrete experiences, and explores whether their narratives can lead to formal knowledge about their roles and relationships.

Research Question

This study examines instructional aides' relationship with teachers and parents in elementary schools. An integral part of this is how instructional aides perceive their status within the school. Aides were asked to describe their roles in the classroom and the school, relationships with teachers they assist, and relationships with parents.

Methodology

Sample

Participants included instructional aides in five elementary schools in three Midwestern school districts. The sample consisted of sixteen females and one male, with ten African Americans and seven European Americans. The participants ranged in age from their mid-20s to early-50s. All had high school diplomas and 30 hours of college credit. In addition, three had associate's degrees and three had bachelor's degrees of which one had a teaching certificate. When the initial interviews were conducted, the participants had worked as instructional aides from two and one half years to twenty-four years. All the female instructional aides had children, though the male participant did not. Three were single mothers with school-aged children and thirteen were married in dual-income households. At the time of the study, the aides worked in various settings including cross-categorical classrooms with students who had been labeled Learning

Disabled (LD) or Educable Mentally Handicapped (EMH), inclusive classrooms, general classrooms, playgrounds, and lunchrooms. Three of the aides worked with students in pre-kindergarten. The others worked with students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Location

The research took place in three Midwestern towns. Midway[2], the first location, is approximately sixty miles south of Chicago and has approximately 30,000 permanent residents. The second and third locations are two cities, Eastmore and Westmore, which resemble one town with a population of approximately 100,000 permanent residents. Eastmore and Westmore school districts have a history of racial and class segregation, which led to concerns about educational equity in the two districts. Midway school district is predominantly African American, whereas the Eastmore and Westmore school districts are predominantly European American. The three school districts had between 30% and 62% African American students and between 80% and 88% European American teachers (Illinois State Board of Education, 2000).

Data

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in the school building. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to elaborate their answers and enabled the interviewer to explore issues raised by responses. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Initially, the transcripts generated from the 17 interviews were hand coded. Another round of coding was conducted using ATLAS/ti, a qualitative software program that assists researchers in coding, organizing, and building theory through textual,

graphical, and audio data (Muhr, 1997). For this study, the ATLAS/ti and its open coding feature enabled the researcher to efficiently organize themes of aides' relationships with teachers and parents and to identify insightful comments. The prevailing issues were organized into six categories: positive relationships with teachers, negative relationships with teachers, understanding teachers' work, connecting with parents, viewing parents as culturally deficient, and lack of parental involvement.

Findings

Developing positive relationships with teachers

Instructional aides in this study had generally positive relationships with teachers. Some placed value on "freedom" given to them by the teachers. Others expressed strong appreciation for teachers' listening skills. Overall, instructional aides' relationships with teachers varied by their location in the school and by the level of supervision they experienced.

> *Patricia*[3]: I think my relationship with the teachers is very good. I think they depend on me a lot to help them out with students. The extra tutoring and the extra side-work that I do with some students who need more help than others—I think they really appreciate that—I think they really appreciate the fact that I could handle a class by myself if they ever had to leave a classroom. They have no problem with my being there by myself with the students and carrying out a lesson, or just assigning something for them to do to keep them busy. I [think] they have a lot of confidence in my abilities.

Patricia appreciated the trust and freedom that the teachers she assisted bestowed upon her. Their level of confidence in her abilities conveyed to her that she was doing well at her job and had a lot to offer the students. Felecia's sentiments confirmed that

instructional aides were being "allowed" to go beyond their job descriptions based on teacher receptivity.

> *Felecia*: We get along, it's like she let me do a lot of things that a lot of teachers don't let their aides do...

Felecia and Patricia, as well as other instructional aides, valued a certain level of freedom. The "freedom" meant that their teachers acknowledged their experience in the classroom and found them capable of stepping into a teaching role. The instructional aides had experience working with children. They had also gained knowledge through their observations of the teachers. Although, most of the instructional aides did not have a bachelor's degree, they believed they knew just as much and in some instances more than a novice teacher about handling discipline related issues with particular children.

Instructional aides considered the teachers' listening skills a key component to a positive relationship.

> *Joe:* I've got a great teacher...That lets me do pretty much whatever I want to do, meaning as far as helping out, teaching the kids and stuff like that, you know, she really listens to me, and so the rest of them you know, some of them got the teachers that's just a little crab-and-drag... but I guess I lucked out, that's why I'm relatively happy...

When teachers listened, the instructional aides felt valued and respected. The teachers Joe, Ramona, and Brenda assisted were able to effectively communicate with them. The teachers were not just giving directives, they also wanted to hear the instructional aides' viewpoints. Joe had a bachelor's degree and wanted to become a physical education teacher. He had worked with children in afterschool settings and felt he possessed a wealth of non-school related information about the students. The teacher he assisted listened to his information and valued his insights into the children's lives.

> *Brenda*: ...the woman that I work with is a wonderful woman. I love her and she gives me a lot of free reign in the classroom. And she calls me her "right arm" when we have teacher/parent conferences and stuff like that she always asks for my opinion...

Many of the instructional aides in this study worked in cross-categorical and inclusive classrooms. In these settings, they provided the one-on-one instruction that was required for students with special needs. The teacher Brenda assisted acknowledged that she knew about the students' progress and could provide additional information to parents.

Many teachers 'trained' their instructional aides and some even encouraged them to become teachers and continue their professional development on their own.

> *Ramona*: The teachers want the assistants to be included on all the conferences. Like we're going in to Chicago to the AE...I'm going to say it...AYEC [NAEYC] conference...okay, is that the right...and they're paying money out of the grant because the school...no actually I think this year the school district is paying us to go too, but in the past sometimes we've had to struggle with that, and if they didn't pay for us, the teachers would take money out of the grant to make sure that we got to go too because they think it's valuable and so I like that, that makes you feel that you're...that you're valued ...

Ramona's narrative indicates that more than one teacher at the school was willing to help instructional aides. Several teachers invested some of their grant awards so that some instructional aides could attend conferences and become better at what they do.

The respect some instructional aides felt from teachers who demonstrated trust, offered freedom, and listened to ideas influenced the aides' decisions to remain in their current positions.

> *Ramona*: Very positive, especially in this building... I feel valued and needed and I don't feel like I'm just the aide, I don't have that feeling at all.

Experiencing negative relationships with teachers

Negative comments regarding relationships with teachers were rare. The negative narratives by the instructional aides pertained to direct and indirect comments by teachers and hostile school climates. From the aides' perspective, some teachers had personal professional burdens that prevented them from taking time to build a positive rapport with the instructional aides. One instructional aide elaborated on this issue:

> *Tonya:* There's just so much that you have to do and go on, but you have a lot of teachers that [will] not talk to you right anyway. So they don't know how to use the aide right.
>
> *Karla*: Right, and so how do you respond to that?
>
> *Tonya:* I kind of ignore them—I kind of say that they don't know no better, and I [want to] be there for the kids, I'm not for them...so I'm not caring what they're talking about and what kind of attitude they have towards me. I'm working for the kids. And if I didn't get paid or anything, I'm still working for the kids, you know, I'm trying to help the kids out, I'm not trying to help them [the teachers'] out.

Tonya interpreted one teacher's lack of interaction as a sign that she was not prepared to supervise instructional aides. Regardless of this less than positive relationship, Tonya reminded herself that she was there for the students.

> Other negative experiences were interpreted as isolated actions by one teacher.
>
> *Kelley*: ...I have worked with a teacher that belittled her aides...and she just yelled and screamed at us the whole time, and did things I didn't agree with and you know, I just tried to keep my, you know, my mouth closed and okay, if this is how you're going to run things, you know, then that's your choice.

Similar to Tonya's experiences, Kelley's was a personal affront. Kelley also decided to let the teacher's demeaning behavior pass. Kelley worked with various teachers and,

other than this particular incident, commented that she had positive relationships with them. Other negative experiences had to do with indirect comments made by teachers.

> *Megan:* Some places they would just as soon you weren't there...I was subbing somewhere once, so it didn't bother me at the time...I heard a couple of the teachers... talking and saying that they wished they didn't have aides at all. They would rather have one regular teacher instead of each having a full-time aide.

Megan remembered these comments and felt the teachers did not value her or her role in the school.

Understanding teachers' work

Instructional aides observed teachers' relationships and treatment of students and the multiple duties that teachers perform.

> *Kelley*: [...] School District is a lot different than other districts. I mean, a lot of the teachers don't expect the same thing from the kids...

Kelley is a European American woman in a Title I school with a predominantly African American student body and a predominantly European American teaching staff. Kelley noticed that the teachers' expectations of children differed, and also found that the teachers hung a negative cloud above some students. Kelly believed that some students were being treated differently based on issues of class, assumed ability, and/or race.

Instructional aides also perceived the teacher's job to be difficult. They believed that teachers were unjustifiably criticized for what was not achieved instead of praised for what had been accomplished.

> *Tonya:* Because teachers have got too much to do here they [parents] think that just because the kid's not getting the perfect grades on their tests and stuff, it's your [teacher's] fault. You have taught and taught as much you can, it's not your fault that your kid is not able to take the tests correctly—the ISAT test and all those little state-wide tests—and I don't feel that's

> your fault and I don't feel that's your job. They even stick that [students failure] on the principal…

Although, Tonya did not always have a great relationship with the teachers, she was quick to defend their treatment by the parents. Instructional aides noticed the blame placed on teachers by parents and that led many to not wanting to become teachers.

Connecting with parents

Instructional aides' relationships with parents have a lot to do with the school climate, the teachers' relationship with parents, the aides' relationship with students, aides' perceptions of the parents, and instructional aides' perception of their status in the school. Depending on the aides' roles, they may interact only with children, a particular teacher, and the building administrator and not with parents.

Because the literature suggests that minority aides have a special relationship with minority students' parents, this study explored these relationships. Tonya and Felecia are African American women. Felecia's connection to the community was strengthened by her husband and his extended family. Tonya was from the Midway community and previously worked for the local YMCA in an early childhood program, but that did not result in positive opinions about students' parents.

> *Tonya:* No, I might not get to know some of the parents, I mean like… I might know them from the street or I went to school with them, but other than that, no you don't, and sometimes you get these little parents and they just don't care what you say, you're not in charge and it doesn't matter. You know, we don't want to hear nothing you have to say, it's just the teacher's problem.

Tonya stated that she did not have a relationship with students' parents and that had to do with her view that the parents' lacked respect for her. Neither Tonya nor Felecia's experiences fit the descriptions in the literature that suggest that only minority

instructional aides can bridge the cultural and communication gap between schools and parents.

Meanwhile, Kelley had a different type of relationship with some students' parents. Some instructional aides stated that she had overstepped the boundary of her duties as an instructional aide.

> *Kelley*: But, yeah, the one little girl that I worked with that had the G-Tube—she had Cerebral Palsy—I got to know her parents real well…me and my husband go over and baby-sit for them…her bedroom's not like a normal child's bedroom, she has an IV thing and she has to be plugged in and get formula and all this medicine before…who wants to do that? They can not find a babysitter and they don't really want to just, you know, leave her with anybody…And to have a nurse come out to the house and stay with her is, you know, unreal. So this fall in October they actually got to go to Chicago without their children because we stayed. You know, and I could plug her in and, you know, all of that, and they have another child that had a liver transplant…so we stay with them and then they can go out and do…we're babysitting…next weekend they're going to Medieval Times; so they get to go somewhere, you know, and know that their kids are taken care of. But not, you know, I'm not a nurse, I wasn't trained for that, never thought I'd be able to do anything like that, but because the situation arrived and you got to buck-up and do it, you know.

Kelley and Colleen also acted as babysitters for their students. While this may seem unorthodox behavior for school staff, it reflects their ethic of caring (Hill Collins, 1991, 1995, 1998; Noddings, 1994). Their connection to the school community defies the dominant literature that bases the relationship of aides and families solely on race and ethnicity, rather than on other attributes.

> *Colleen*: I'm also on PTO here, so there is one parent whose children go here and when you say socially, I mean, we've done a couple of things together, and like for instance, she called me this morning and her...[she needed] a ride...her daughter needs a ride to the babysitter, so I'm taking her daughter from here to the babysitter after school-that type of thing, you know. And there's some parents, yeah, that they'll call me and you know, we're close enough that they'll ask for a favor or something, yeah.

Kelly and Colleen have worked hard to establish positive relationships with the students and their families regardless of race. Instructional aides can be a bridge to the school community; however, the bridge concept needs to be redefined to include those who are not the same race or ethnicity as their students.

Viewing parents as culturally deficient

On the one hand, instructional aides discussed the external forces working against parents that makes it difficult for them to care for their families. On the other hand, they blamed parents, specifically single parents, for their children's challenges. Olinthia stated that her students' parents were dealing with issues related to poverty and that the parents formed personal relationships that were destructive.

> *Olinthia*: We ...our school is...we have a lot of kids in crisis, a lot of kids in foster [care], a lot of kids that have seen a lot of stuff, that's been through a lot of stuff. And so this year is just escalating more as far as behavioral laws. I can't explain it, but I know we're in a high poverty area...so we're getting a lot of kids that ... have a single mom, or are just in a bad situation. We're close to the shelter over there for...battered women's shelter. So we get a lot of those kids over here.

Brenda, a Caucasian mother of four, also felt this way.

> *Brenda*: Having children come in here and you see that they haven't learned...like some of the things they should have learned at home. Counting...even knowing some of their letters. In kindergarten we had a lot of kids who...didn't know their numbers, didn't know their letters, didn't know their colors. And some of that is like stuff that I would have thought the parents would have taught. But I guess it's because a lot of our parents are so young and lower income and maybe they just don't have the time. And a lot of them just too young...the kids are kids having babies. I think that's probably the one big problem.

Tonya and Brenda worked in the same school and blamed the parents for students' problems.

> *Tonya*: I want to say...I'm not going to say that all single parents are like this, and I'm not going to say some of them aren't, but I want to say more or less some single parents just don't care, I mean they're more or less out for the men, and who...what they're going to next, some of them don't even want to go out and go to work or anything; they don't care anymore, you know, they don't care about their life and what their kids are doing.

Many instructional aides felt the absence of a father in the home or the presence of a harmful male had plunged many children's home life into disarray.

> *Joe*: A lot of them view me as a father figure because there was like times that some of the kids would say, "I wish that you was my dad," and some of the girls are just...they're just not used to seeing a man around a woman...most of them aren't because most the kids in our classroom, I believe they're broken homes-all of them. So it's just seeing a positive male that's not cussing at them...

Joe saw himself as a positive male figure in his students' lives.

> *Carmen*: The kids are just different, I guess with the parents is [are] not raising their children right like they used to. But you know, drugs and alcohol, the kids are growing up in these different types of homes, the father's not there to play his important part. They just go through a lot and I think they bring all of that to school with them, so it's kind of hard.

Like other instructional aides, Carmen saw the lack of a father at home as one of many problems in the children's lives. Delpit (1992) says that we teach these negative or stereotypic assumptions to student teachers. She stated, "Teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households" (p.241). The instructional aides in this study were not provided any training on working with diverse families. The lack of the information at school may have let these stereotypes flourish.

Observing a lack of parent involvement

> *Mrs. O'Connor*: I think there's very little relationship between the parents and the school. I think you find very few parents that really get involved with these children. Most of them are just not even in the picture. And I think that creates a lot of problems, a lot of problems.

Mrs. O'Connor conceded that there are various issues surrounding the parents' ability or lack of ability to support their children's academic endeavors. She believed that parent involvement was imperative for a child to succeed and that, regardless of other issues in their life that were beyond their control, involvement was one thing parents could do. However, it was not clear who was to supposed to cultivate and sustain the connections of home and school. Delpit (1992) stated, "Often, middle-class school professionals are appalled by what they see of poor parents, and most do not have the training or ability to see past surface behaviors to the meanings behind parents' actions" (p.243).

This study indicates that you don't have to be middle-class to have these perceptions. The instructional aides, with similar backgrounds as the parents, presumed that students' parents had failed in their duties. Unlike some other instructional aides, Phyllis analyzed why there was little parent involvement.

> *Phyllis*: Well, okay, this is a situation: many of our children are bussed from the city, and I think—which is what, five minutes down the road? But it feels like it's forever, especially to parents that really don't come, and you don't come to [the school] unless you live here. I mean there's no reason to come to [school]... So I think that does play a role in parents thinking their kids are so far away...

Phyllis' views on the situation reflect her understanding of the position of instructional aide. She does not see her job as involving parents or anyone besides the students and teachers she works for and with.

Conclusions

Summary

The practical knowledge and personal experience of the instructional aides about their relationships with teachers and parents reinforce the need for much better and targeted training of teachers and aides for the work they do together and with the parents and families of students. The voices of instructional aides provide new insights into their perceptions and relationships with teachers and parents and suggest changes in policies that affect those interactions.

Relationships with teachers. Although this sample of instructional aides had generally positive relationships with the teachers, their experiences and histories suggested this is not always the case. Most importantly, the instructional aides description of positive relationships with teachers provided information on the variables necessary to encourage and strengthen those interactions. Some instructional aides believed their supervising teachers did not recognize the aides' talents and skills, and were not supervising well. They realized that hard work and the pressures of teaching affected the quality of the relationships that teachers have with aides. The perceptions and experiences of the instructional aides reinforced the need for professional development to help teachers more knowledgably and effectively supervise and work with instructional aides. This study points to the need for such training to help teachers learn to listen to and

respect aides' ideas and efforts, and to learn if, how, and when to offer aides new responsibilities to assist students and parents.

Relationships with parents. The instructional aides in this study gave mixed messages about their relationships with students' parents and families. Some instructional aides had close relationships with parents and often served as babysitters for their students. Other instructional aides placed the blame for students' problems on their families, and rarely recognized the institutional factors that influenced students' academic success. The negative comments made me recall the work of Daniel P. Moynihan (1965) and Gunnar Myrdal (1944), which stated that Blacks were culturally deficient and therefore to blame for their lack of achievement. Moreover many stereotypical comments were made regarding single parent households and the negative impact it had on the students. These instructional aides were concerned about their students, but were not always able to cultivate positive attitudes about or relationships with the parents.

Implications for policy and practice

The results suggest the need to revise prior descriptions and expectations about instructional aides as cultural bridges or brokers. Instructional aides' relationships with parents are neither automatic nor bound by race, ethnicity, or class. The instructional aides in this study were asked, at different times, to be colleagues, bridges to the community, and cultural brokers connecting home and school. However, neither they nor the teachers and parents they worked with were prepared for those roles. The aides' overriding concern was for the students they assisted. Only some had experiences and duties that brought them in frequent contact with students' parents. Some of the aides were natural and effective bridges or cultural brokers who could explain the school and

students' needs to parents, and who worked with parents as partners in the community. Others kept their distance and worked as classroom assistants more than community connectors. Training is needed to help aides understand their roles and links to students' families.

The results suggest the need to revise the ways that teachers and instructional aides work together. School and district leaders need to be aware of how instructional aides perceive teachers. Teachers are often instructional aides' supervisors, but some are not prepared to supervise adults and others do not want that responsibility. In addition, some instructional aides envision themselves as colleagues with and not subordinates to teachers. Therefore, conflicts may arise due to the schools' and districts' hierarchical structures that give teachers and administrators higher status than other employees.

Title I in the *No Child Left Behind Act (2001)* states that instructional aides can provide instructional services while working under the direct supervision of a teacher, but does not acknowledge that teachers may need some guidance to supervise aides effectively. Teachers need to be given explicit descriptions of their supervisory roles and ways to develop the characteristics (e.g., listening, consulting, supporting, evaluating, etc.) that instructional aides find beneficial to their professional growth. School and district leaders have a responsibility to provide this training for teachers so that students' needs are met.

The results suggest the need to clarify the concept of "team" to maximize the effectiveness of the work teachers, aides, and parents do together to help children succeed in school. The term "team" has become commonplace in special education research (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; Lacattiva,

1985), but needs to encompass other aspects of schooling. For example, action teams of educators, parents and family members, and community partners have been shown to strengthen the bonds of school, family, and community (Epstein, 2001; Epstein, et. al, 2002; Sanders, 2001). Such action teams plan and implement activities to involve teachers, instructional aides, and parents in ways that help all students reach school goals. This approach insures that families will be welcomed instead of criticized. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the team, its members, and the targeted audience of all families may help build mutual respect among all partners who have a stake in students' success.

The results suggest the need to revise the partnerships of teachers, aides, and parents to increase parental involvement in children's education. In this study, instructional aides criticized parents for their lack of involvement in the school and with their children's learning. None of the aides in this study seemed to have been guided by the teachers or administrators in how to understand and assist parents to become more positively involved. Instead, these aides expected the parents of students in their schools to automatically know what to do to help their children and how to do it. Without school leadership in developing programs of partnership that assist and enable all parents to become productively involved, many parents will not know that they are welcome in their children's schools or how to assist their children at home in easy and productive ways. The aides' observations reflect the current state of family involvement in many schools, which can be improved with the improved definition of "team" and attention to the development of positive programs of partnership.

The voices of instructional aides reveal topics and issues that can be addressed directly with thoughtful and basic policies in schools and school districts. The results of this study should help school and district leaders understand and improve the quality of relationships of instructional aides, teachers and parents and the effectiveness of instructional aides.

Notes

1. Instructional aides are described as teacher aides, teaching assistants, auxiliary personnel, education support personnel, paraeducators, and paraprofessional school personnel. The United States Department of Labor's Occupational Outlook Handbook 2000-01 Edition states that teacher assistants "provide instructional and clerical support for classroom teachers, allowing the teacher more time for lesson planning and teaching" (p.326). This research uses the term "instructional aide" for two reasons. One, regardless of the title, most instructional aides engage in some sort of teaching. Second, the term instructional aide is used by the school districts involved in this research.
2. The names of cities, school districts, and instructional aides have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants.
3. Instructional aides selected their own pseudonyms.

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